



Photo History



# From April 2025

## (Volume 188)

LOW\_TIDE FESTIVAL on The Scilly Isles

### Revellers party for just 90 minutes on disappearing sandbar at world's shortest festival



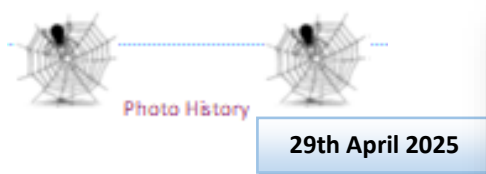
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## Revellers party for just 90 minutes on disappearing sandbar at world's shortest festival



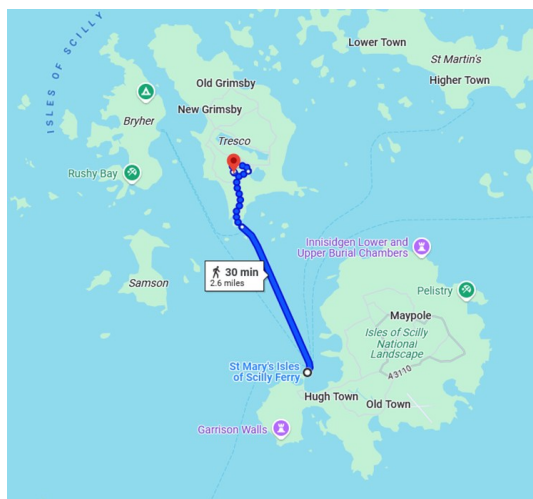
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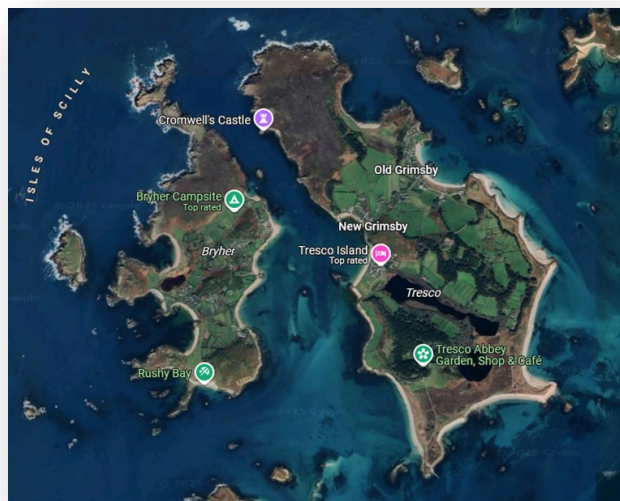
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### Sand Bar Saga

A long while back we had seen a short piece on TV about a strange phenomenon that happened at extreme spring tides: Two of the Scilly islands, Bryher and Tresco, normally separated, amazingly saw the sea between them vanish as the tide receded and for a very short period of up to two hours only twice a year a giant sandbar was visible



*The 20 minute second boat from St Mary's to Tresco*



*This shows how Bryher and Tresco are normally seen*

Many locals made the most of this bi-annual event that was, in no way, guaranteed to happen. Weather allowing, locals were ready with stalls of fresh local seafood, locally baked cakes, exotic drinks, music etc., in all, a total unique gathering.

One of the stalls was run by Island Fish with their boat on the sand bar so I spoke to Amanda, the owner who was really helpful with directions from once we landed at the small quay on Tresco to finding the sand bar

#### Confession time..

*We had to admit that we didn't even know where the Scilly Isles were.*

However, not to be defeated, we did our homework and this resulted in us booking a 5 hour train to Penzance where we also booked an Air B&B cottage overlooking the sea. The next day after arriving in Penzance we made an early start from our delightful accommodation with the alarm waking us at 5.15am. A quick shower and then a sort walk to Sullivans, a small cafe by the harbour which opened at 6.00am. (We did our homework)

A typical full English and then we walked to the quay where we speedily boarded the Scillonian 111. which is a compact ferry that was surprisingly pretty full. The ferry journey was approx. three hours from Penzance to St Mary's and it was hot, sunny and calm and the Atlantic route along the Cornwall coast allowed us to enjoy Penzance, Newlyn and Lands End from a different perspective. Talking to other passengers, we were informed why there were so many fellow passengers.

It transpired that The Annual Pilot Gigg race was taking place on The Scilly Isles over the next few days and avid followers from many countries made this annual pilgrimage to St Mary's (Maybe all the tee shirts with various crew names should have given us a clue.)



### Rowers head to Scilly for World Gig Championships







Gig crews at the end of the racing in St Mary's harbour

**David Dixon**

BBC News Cornwall

**Chloe Parkman**

BBC News, South West

2 May 2025

## **Experienced gig-rowers and first-timers are making their way to the Isles of Scilly for the World Pilot Gig Championships.**

The first competitive race takes place on Friday evening, with dozens more in a series of races between 2 and 4 May off the coast of St Mary's.

More than 450 crews will take part in the event with teams from the Netherlands, USA and across the UK.

We had no idea what this was but after chatting to several fellow passengers we learned all about it. These rowing six man woman or mixed crew, plus a coxswain trained hard and sent their rigs from all over the country and abroad to be ready on St Mary's for a very grueling race which had been going for nearly 50 years.

We arrived on the ferry at St Mary's with a great deal of excitement all round us.

Second confession: we had mistakenly thought that St Mary's was a town on Tresco.

Big mistake.





Another local paper cutting



How ignorant we must have appeared. It transpires that St Mary's (where the race is being held) is actually the largest of the Scilly Isles and we still had to get from there to Tresco where the Low Tide Event was scheduled to happen and time was of the essence.

We were surrounded by a mass of Pilot Gigg crews and helpers and we had to dodge the crowds and race along the quay to search for a small boat to transport us onwards the 20 minute sea trip to Tresco.



The Firethorn that took us from St Mary's to Bryher

As the small boat travelled through the lush closely clustered islands fellow passengers pointed out many fascinating features but we saw virtually no sign of habitation. The disembarkation was frantic and we attempted to get some return journey information to reassure us about the times and departure from this bleak shoreline.

This was now around 11.45am and people, backpacks, cases and bikes were rapidly cleared from the boat and their place was speedily taken by other folk.

Everyone, with the exception of us, seemed to know precisely the tide times, boat departure times etc





We were eventually given the time of 2.45 for the small boat to arrive back to the same tiny quay for our return leg of this trip. We did a quick calculation to ensure we would be able to get to the sand bar, enjoy the festivities and get back in time.

This was a logistically difficult exercise, but then this whole complicated idea has needed a great deal of careful working out .

We were so near and still thought we might miss it. Like magic, two tiny electric vehicles appeared on this steep narrow track leasing from the quay and rapidly filled with the few people from the small boat together with their cases and backpacks etc The landscape was beautiful with flowering bushes covering the gentle hills down to the sea.



We must have looked totally bewildered as we pleaded for a lift..and we were smilingly offered the last two seats .We thankfully climbed aboard and after a short journey we past through a strip of grass which was both the heliport and small aircraft landing strip and on rounding a bend we saw, below us, crowds of people converging across the shimmering sands walking towards the centre of the now exposed sandbar. From above this looked like a procession of ants .







They were joined by a similar procession of ants crossing from Bryer on the opposite side of the sandbar also making its way to the centre of the sand bar. The driver called out for Lynn and myself to get off here and we thanked him and exchanged cheerful goodbyes with the other passengers

Sitting on the side of the beach we removed shoes and socks and I put on flip flops with Lynn barefooted and joined the stream of crowds heading out to the centre where flags and tractors and stalls could be seen.

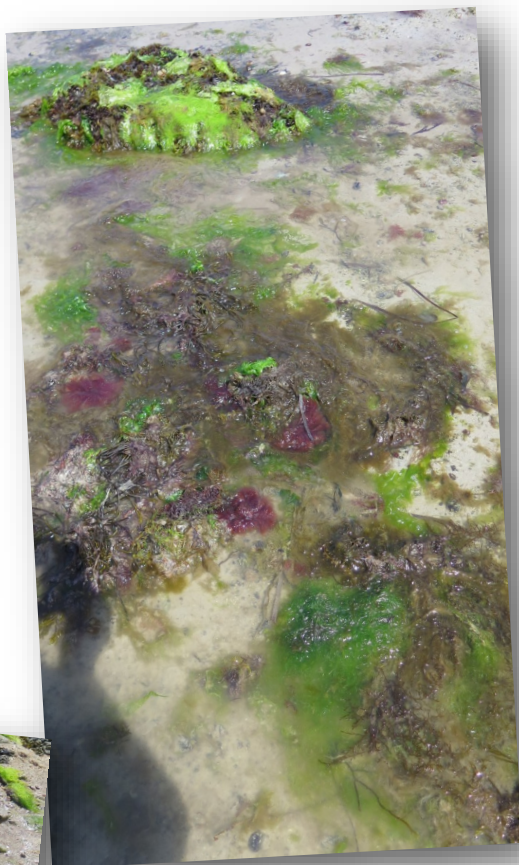


The sand glimmered in the sun and pools of water and seaweed remained where just hours before 15' feet of sea had covered that whole area. Shells and crabs and rocky pools lined out path.



Stall holders said it had been cancelled in previous years due to terrible weather.

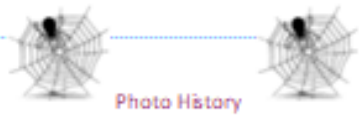




The local ice cream  
was great







Island Fish and Bryher Bake Box and many other entrepreneurial folk had set up stalls and were doing brisk business. (Even tee shirts for £25.00)



We queued and bought super delicious soft buns with a lobster filling listed as 'lobster BLT'. Lynn loved her lobster bloody Mary and we both loved St Mary's local ice cream and we took butter-scotch cookies home with us together with lobster quiche and lobster scotch eggs.

It was a totally unique experience and we were conscious of the time restraints...only another 20 minutes before the tide would creep in, submerging the sand bar and maybe next September (weather permitting) this might happen again.







A trailer provided an impromptu stage for a singing guitarist and everyone was happy and smiles and enjoyment permeated every inch of this short-lived phenomenon.







## Photo History



Suddenly, as though by magic flags came down, stalls were packed away and stall!-holders were ferried off the sandbar sitting on trailers behind tractors and everyone slowly made their way in both directions..

Sitting on the beach side we brushed the sand from our feet, put on our shoes and made our way back to the quay.



We seemed alone on this track back and as we looked down on the sandbar we saw the tide covering it and where just a sort time earlier had been a scene of fun had now become the sea separating the two islands once again. It was quiet and surreal.

*Email from Amanda Pender (Director of Island Fish)....Wow I am so impressed with you both – my heroes of the week, and glad it was worth it – unfortunately for whatever reason your pictures did not come out – if you can re-send then please do, love to see them. And do visit again the next event is the 9<sup>th</sup> September, love to meet you. All the very best from a sunny Bryher!!*



The boat waiting for the tide to refloat it was all that remained after the crowds had left







The trek back took longer than expected and as we turned the final bend a couple walking the opposite way told us that a boat for St Mary's was about to leave. Thank heavens for her advice. We ran as the boat waited for us to board. This was so lucky as we later found that the next connecting ferry departed earlier than advertised and we may well have missed it.

Unbeknown to us, because of The Pilot Gigg race all boats, air transport and accommodation were totally booked up.

### ***We had no plan B!***

A great sunny journey took us back to St Mary's where we boarded the Scillonian 111 ferry which left at 4.00 ..not 4.30 as advertised.

Summing up..we were so lucky with every aspect of our connections. It seemed amazing that despite so much advance planning so many potential problems had occurred and yet somehow we still managed to be part of this totally unique enjoyable fun happening